

Air Force Navy Joint Military Ball

September 28, 2012

“To Those Who Built and Carry the American Dream”
Speech Before the 2012 Air Force/Navy Joint Military Ball
Ambassador Howard Gutman
SHAPE, Mons Belgium

Major General Michelle Johnson, U.S. Air Force
Rear Admiral Frederic Strohm de Frias, French Navy
Rear Admiral Bruce Williams, UK Navy
Members of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force
Family, Friends,

It is an honor and a privilege for Michelle, my wife of 31 years next Wednesday, and I to be here tonight . . .

To get to celebrate the anniversary of the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy. . .

Here, at SHAPE, the center of the world’s military partnership.
Now, first on the lighter side, it is an honor and a privilege for us to finally get to talk to the Air Force and Navy.

You see, I have been the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium for over three years, making me the second longest serving U.S. Ambassador to Belgium in 31 years.

So this November, I will -- now for the fourth time -- be addressing the Marines at the Embassy’s annual Marine Corps Ball.

So it is terrific, finally to get to speak to members of the U.S. Navy and Air Force.

Now don’t get me wrong. I love our Marines and it is a thrill each year to speak to them.

But, let’s face it. The Marines really get plenty. They have that catchy slogan, “The Few, The Proud . . .”, They get John Wayne to play them in the movies, and they often get those cool commercials on television during NFL football games with the knights with their lances on horseback and the steeds clashing as Carl Orff’s “Carmina Burana” pulses in the background.

Now watching those commercials, I have often wondered if our terrific service people in the Navy and Air Force were thinking: “You know, we too would love to have knights and steeds clashing, but excuse us, when we defend the country, those knights and steeds don’t really fit into our submarines and on our F-16’s.”

But far more seriously, for me, it really is a great honor and privilege to be here tonight. Now in truth, every and any speaker that you would have asked to address you tonight would start their

speech noting that it is an honor and a privilege to be here. Those words are for many and sometimes for me just part of the standard speech opening. They are often routine phrases on the way to the substance of the speech.

But, for me, tonight, those words are not platitudes. The "honor" and the "privilege" are deeply felt. Those words come from the heart.

You see, when President Obama named me to be U.S. Ambassador to Belgium in 2009, and when we began to make our rounds and speak to the people of Belgium, one of the things I was most proud of is that I had lived the American dream . But as I made those visits around Belgium, I began truly to understand what many Belgians already knew first hand, which is that whereas I was blessed to live the American dream . . .

You . . . each and every one of you in this room, and those who came before you in the U.S. Navy and Air Force and our proud service men and women throughout history . . . You built that dream. You built the American dream. And you preserve it daily.

And it is a true honor and a privilege as well because, when I decided to accept the position and to leave the private sector where I had been a successful lawyer for 27 years, I realized that although I had made money, I had really never gotten to make a difference. I had not gotten to serve. I had not gotten to give back.

But each of you, each day, and throughout your careers, you have gotten to make a difference. You have gotten to serve, to give back.

And finally it is a great honor and privilege to be here because what I have learned since I have taken this job is that together -- me, my fellow colleagues in the U.S. Department of State, and you, the spectacular men and women of the U.S. military and of our allies in NATO and in the military within the brotherhood of man -- as part of our joint service, what we are doing is taking that dream that you built and that I and so many Americans got to live . . .

A dream long "misnamed" the American dream, but a dream in fact shared by mothers and fathers everywhere. . . .

By mothers and fathers in Afghanistan who now watch their children including their daughters going to school, and even going to University. . . .

A dream shared by mothers and fathers in Libya . . .

We together are taking that dream to others and helping to build that dream for them and by so doing, to build a safer, more prosperous, planet for us all . . .

For us and for them. And more importantly, for our children and for theirs.

So if I might, I thought I would focus on some of these ideas, on these lessons I have learned in this adventure, on these understandings I have reached in getting to work these past three years with all

of you and your brethren and sisters who are protecting and building our planet.

You see, for me, as for so many Belgians and for so many others, had it not been for you, my American dream would have been extinguished in a snow-laden woods in Europe.

My father had grown up and lived in a Polish town of about 3000 people, with about 1000 Jews. Of that 1000, about a dozen Jews including my father had made it to the woods and survived there for nearly three years during World War II in the woods outside the town, while all of the rest had been slaughtered. But after you answered the call, after you saved those who remained in Europe, he left the woods and came to America in 1950, not knowing a word of English, but believing that our country offered a better opportunity for his children than the land he'd left had offered for him.

He died when I was 16, and I started working as a dishwasher and a waiter after school in high school and then used student loans to go to Columbia University and Harvard Law School. Graduating Harvard Law School near the top of the class, I was able to get a clerkship on our US Court of Appeals in Texas and then on the United States Supreme Court -- a position offered only to the top 40 or so law school graduates across the country each year.

Launched deep into the American dream, I thereafter joined a prestigious law firm where I spent most of my 27 year career, taking a two year diversion to serve as Special Assistant to the Director of the FBI for counter intelligence and counter terrorism. And during the legal career, I moonlighted as a political advisor with the worst track record in American history -- if I supported you, you generally lost. Indeed I was a lawyer on the brief in Gore v. Bush: one of the lawyers assigned to the case, for Gore. We lost by one vote.

After President Obama called me to come to Belgium in 2009 -- and after a 7 month process of White House, FBI, IRS and Senate background checks --we arrived in Belgium. I had indeed lived the American dream.

And when we got here, I learned lessons about that American dream. As I left a restaurant passing a table of older Belgians, they rose and gave me a spontaneous round of applause and as I approached to say hello, they said not "hello", but "thank you." I learned they were not greeting me; they were standing and applauding for you. For the Navy and the Air Force and the rest of the U.S servicemen and women who had liberated them from oppression not once, but twice in the name of decency and freedom. I learned when I visited Belgian villas and estates, that they never repainted the bullet holes from the Nazi occupation but simply covered the holes with pictures, never to forget. I learned when I toured our American battlefield cemeteries and saw fresh flowers on the graves -- when U.S. family members could not have come in such numbers -- that Belgians have long adopted our graves and still honor the dignity of all who had served. I learned that Belgians bring flowers not for my ceremonies, but for your service.

And so, after 52 years of thinking I deserved the credit for what I had achieved, I finally learned what Belgians had long understood: that while I could live the American dream, while I could benefit by its opportunities, it was you who had built that American dream that I had been blessed to live, a dream that without you would have frozen or been gassed in a woods of tyranny in Poland.

And after a 27 year largely private sector career, as I spent the past three years chatting with U.S. forces in Europe at EUCOM, at bases outside Belgium, at our many memorial services, at SHAPE, at USAG, at our Marine house, throughout NATO and in traveling with the Belgian Minister of Defense to visit troops in Kunduz, Kabul and Kandahar; from the Marine newly arrived at the Embassy, to the DAO's office, right up through Admiral Stavrides and Admiral Gallagher, I have learned how rich getting to serve and make a difference truly makes you. I have learned that the chance to participate in building a more secure, more prosperous planet is a priceless opportunity.

Now, it certainly isn't always fun and it certainly isn't always easy. You sometimes don't always get the credit and at times you have gotten a hard time even from the dearest of allies. Even in those cases, you and those who have long served in the military, usually have gotten your part right. But we, those charged with helping to build the alliances, support and understanding, those in charge of constructing the bridges for success, have needed to keep doing a better job.

Nowhere has the need to better coordinate diplomatic and military efforts been more apparent than in Belgium. You see, the same Belgium that well understands that the U.S. military has built the dream of every parent in the U.S. and preserved it as well in Belgium, had more recently grown somewhat cynical and skeptical of us. Despite our history as the dearest of allies and the bonds that followed the world wars, in the mid 2000's, that relationship between us was widely described in the press as "frosty." As a result of differences over the handling of the Iraq War, the Belgian government considered closing the Port of Antwerp to U.S. ships, closing Belgian airspace to U.S. planes and subjecting U.S. officials to criminal jurisdiction in Belgium under its then law of universal jurisdiction.

There is a temptation now to ask how could Belgian officials and politicians have formulated and undertaken such anti-American actions? But the lesson from Belgium -- a lesson that should resonate through defense and foreign policy circles no matter what the situs -- is that politicians and officials don't create opinion. Citizens do. Politicians and officials don't serve as the inspiration for policies. Popular opinion does. Politicians and officials simply follow the voice of the citizenry. That is a beauty of democracy, a virtue possessed both by Belgium and America.

And however we got so far off track, we faltered in the minds and hearts of the citizens of Belgium, we separated from the people. Indeed, the Gallup Polling Company started in 2007 to track public opinion in every country concerning America and U.S. leadership. And the results of the first poll showed that in Belgium in 2007, only 8 per cent of the citizenry had a favorable view of U.S. leadership while 65% had an unfavorable view and 27% were neutral or had no opinion.

Think about that. 8% favorable and 65% unfavorable. 8 to 1 times as unfavorable as favorable.

When the citizens are frosty and cynical, politicians can consider closing ports and airspace. Militaries cannot cooperate. In that yesterday, we had lost our way with one another. We talked past each other. We failed to look each other in the eye.

The election of Barack Obama and the appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State in the beginning of 2009 took us a long way towards rebuilding the bridge. The Gallup Poll for 2009 showed that the change in leadership raised the favorability rating from 8% to 30% - a 22% gain. And we are proud to note that in that international poll released by Gallup in May 2012 ---4 months ago --

Belgium finished first in the world with the highest gain in favorability rating for the U.S. leadership. There was another 15% gain in favorability and another 8% decrease in the unfavorability so that the rating – which was 8%-65% just 5 years ago now stands at 46% favorable and only 22% unfavorable – a more than 2 to 1 edge in favorability where a 1 to 8 rating once stood. Which means that Belgians view American leadership today more favorably than Americans view American leadership.

The rebuilt partnership has produced results for all of us in this room. The Belgium that had once tried to close ports and airspace is now instead actively engaged in the NATO Mission in Afghanistan, and provided the extra surge troops that President Obama requested in 2010 when the Dutch government next door collapsed over that surge request. While some other new leaders have announced the withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan this year, the new Belgian government announced that Belgium will remain side by side with America as we transition out of Afghanistan through 2014, has expressed a willingness to consider post 2014 involvement if asked, and has pledged the full amount of the NATO ask for post-2014 financial support to the Afghan security effort. And when I talked to Belgians in Afghanistan and those who returned, they told me what an honor it was to get to serve with and alongside you, to learn from you. And our partnership with Belgium and the NATO partnership blazed brightly again as working in close coordination with you, Belgium flew 620 air to ground bombing missions in Libya.

Rebuild a partnership and they will come.

And all of you in this room, and together in that NATO partnership that you lead, you are today working to bring the dream of all parents, what we have long called the American dream, to others, and thereby to build a more secure and prosperous planet in the process. A decade ago, the life expectancy for women in Afghanistan was just 44 years of age; today it is 62 years. Where less than a million Afghan kids including almost no girls went to school under the Taliban a decade ago, more than 8 million kids including over 3 million girls are in school today. There are more than 15,000 Afghan girls in university, where not a single one was so enrolled before. And when those girls go to build their dream, they are now taught by more than 500 female university professors who already live theirs.

Take it from me. Take it from the Belgians. Our peace and prosperity is nothing more than the sum of those dreams.

Happy birthday Navy. Happy birthday Air Force. Happy birthday dreambuilders.

Thanks so much and all the best.